DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 180 028 CS 502 740

AUTHOR Wootton, Astrid
TITLE A Programme in Oracy.
PUB DATE Jul 79
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Conference on Developing Oral Communication Competence in Children (Armidale, Australia, July 12-18, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); Communication Skills; Educational Assessment; Educational Philosophy; *Educational Theories; Foreign Countries; *Language Instruction; *Program Descriptions; *Speech Instruction; Teacher Attitudes; *Teaching Methods; Teaching Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Oral Language

ABSTRACT

The oral English program of a parochial girls' school in Australia is described in this paper. Included in the description are the schedule of classes; the qualifications of the teaching staff; and the teaching philosophy, which is based on the concepts that students absorb more during classes than the manifest lesson content and that the greater the variety of linguistic demand, the greater the control of language usage built by students. Emphasized in the report is the rapport and mutual support among the instructional staff and the importance of building interpersonal relations in the classroom between teacher and students. Problems of assessment in such a program are also discussed. (AEA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED180028

A PROGRAMME IN ORACY

by Astrid Wootton

Since the late 1950's there has been a steadily growing body of impressive theory and research in the field of Language and Education. Theory, vital as it most certainly is, is notoriously indigestible in its raw form for classroom teachers, who too often believe, as Fred Inglis, attacking the division of labour head-on puts it, 'universities, in some curious way, are <u>for</u> the production of theory, and teachers are <u>for</u> the exercise of practise'.[1]....."And never the twain shall meet", is murmured by those finding difficulty in transposing theory into practical application. Of course, there have been many, many books published to help teachers in a practical way; from "Language-In-Use",[2] to a plethora of colourful text books and teaching packages. While these often contain useful material and ideas, these books and teaching aids are no substitute for reading the theory, reflecting upon it, examining one's own teaching in the light of these reflections, discussion with committed colleagues, and the slow building of one's personal response to education, modified always by <u>these students</u>, <u>this year</u>. This is what my colleagues and I have been engaged in at the Methodist Ladies' College, Kew, in Victoria.

The Methodist Ladies' College is an Independent Girls' School, with an intake of 1750 students, from Kindergarten to Year 12. For many years now the Oral English component of the study of English has been handled by the Speech and Drama Department. All students from Year 1 to Year 11 have 1 x 40 minute period each week set aside for Oral English activities, and a percentage of the English marks is awarded to this area. In addition we run a Year 11 subject (6 x 40 minutes) in "Communications", also based on the principles of Oral Development. We are currently preparing a Year 12 continuation of this subject, and are hopeful that it will receive accreditation from the Victorian Institute of Secondary Education in the near future. M.L.C. runs its own Business School, where Business Communications is a subject within the course at Year 11 and Year 12. This too, while firmly geared to the work situation, adheres to the same principles of Oral Development.

There are 7 members of our Speech and Drama Department, all specialists and experienced teachers in the field. A valuable asset of the Independent School system, is the possibility of handpicking a group of teachers who will be able to work closely and constructively together, each with her own area of expertise and distinctive teaching style. For a number of years we have, as a team, been developing programmes based on recent theory concerning Oral Language Development. We have experimented widely in the formulation of courses, the presentation of coursework, and the complex area of assessment. Our background reading has spilled across a number of subject areas, to gather together a related body of ideas and information.

For example: Recent Language in Education theory
Educational theory and practice
Communication theory
Interpersonal Behaviour
Developments in the teaching of English, Drama, Oral Skills, etc.
Theory and Practice of Assessment
Values Clarification, the use of Simulation, Teacher Effectiveness Training, Observation and Questioning techniques, etc. etc.

The study of Oracy is an exceptionally complex area in which, until the results of more research is available, teachers must be largely guided by their own experience and sensitivity. However the research that is currently available implies that if the complexity of language functions and structures is to be met systematically within the context of the school environment, it would seem to be essential to provide an intricate, many-faceted curriculum which would impel students to extend their linguistic boundaries in as many directions as possible. In such a vast field both the details and the horizons are tantalizingly vague; however our concentration on the nature of Oral behaviour has brought both detail and broad vision into sharper

CS502740

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Astrid Wootton
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

focus for us. The relevance, for intellectual development, of students' assimilation of their studies through Oral experience makes this whole field rewarding to work in.

It is arguable that the art of the classroom teacher is to some extent in the perception of pattern, and the ability to make valid simplifications. Two simplifications, one concerning Education, the other, Language, have given us a pattern which provides the basic structure of our work.

1. The Hidden Curriculum

The concept of the "hidden curriculum" is well-known, and most teachers would be aware that their students absorb much more during their classes than simply the manifest content of each lesson.

2. Learning Language by "Languaging"

The greater the variety of linguistic demand, and the more complex and imperative the need for language gradually becomes, the greater the control over her own language usage that is built by each student. A common problem in schools is the sameness of linguistic demand.

Combining these two concepts we have developed a system of teaching whereby we have at least two levels of learning constantly and systematically structured into our classwork.

1. The Course Content

This is what the student is conscious of "doing" or "learning about". It could be a dramatic exploration of other lands or other times. It could be the formulation of a set of class "rules" for both teacher and students to abide by. Perhaps they are engaged in the technical instruction of another student into the mysteries of a telephone switchboard; or the organisation, by a harassed stage manager, of her lighting, sound and set crew. Maybe it is a critical analysis of a picture-book for a 3 year old, or a small group discussion on the causes of embarrassment and anxiety.
By ranging over a very wide field of activity and enquiry we hope to overcome the sameness of the classroom, and to provide the variety of context in which varied linguistic demand may be inherent in the work.

2. The Language Content

Underlying the Course Content is the "hidden curriculum" of Oral Language Development - the raison d'etre of the course - the speaking and the listening: but not as exercises. Students, concentrating on the Course Content, are largely unaware of this aspect of the work, and are unselfconscious in their language usage. It is for the teacher to structure situations in which varied modes of language, and growing precision of meaning, and more complex expressions of mood, abstract thought and relationships, are felt, by the students themselves, to be necessary. Thus within the context of the Language Content, the teacher acts not as Critic, nor Language Instructor, nor Corrective Agent, but as the Organiser of Experience. The phrase 'planned intervention' (3) is apt in this context. It is interesting to note that, within the Course Content, many robust roles are available to the teacher, including those of Instructor (in the use of equipment, perhaps), Critic (of technical errors), the Obtuse One (who needs to have things explained clearly), the Thoughtful One (who pursues a student's fleeting idea) or the Initiator of swift decisions (when more important issues are at stake). These, and many other roles are used at the level of Course Content. However, at the level of Language Content, roles must be played with delicate sensitivity. The light touch is essential. The teachers own use of Language is a powerful model for students to absorb and modify - or to reject as inappropriate to their current needs. Teachers and students must learn to listen to each other with imaginative empathy. Intention must often be discerned through half-formulated ideas and inchoative language -

to act as Critic in such circumstances might well, at the least, be counter-productive.

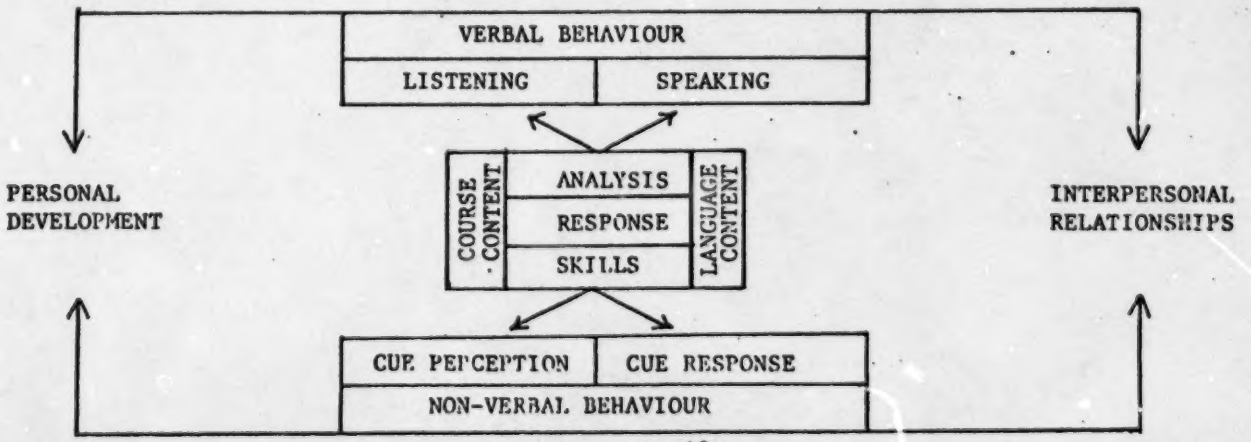
In the vast and complex area of Language we concentrate on a simple range of variation. Language Functions are part of our everyday consciousness. W.P.Robinson's table of functions (4) we find useful and helpful when reflecting on our work. Register, too, is a valuable factor in the organisation of our work. While recognising the fluidity of this aspect of Language, Joos' 5 levels (5) are useful guidelines. Context is perhaps the area that most interests us: that words and syntax are not in themselves sufficient to meet the linguistic demands of an unfamiliar context; that language and experience are inextricably linked; that "the more often we have to cope with the new and the unfamiliar, the more adept we become at coping with it 'on our feet'" (6); these concepts underlie much of what we do and are at the core of our philosophy. W.P.Robinson in "Language In and Out of School" (7) expressed lucidly and with vitality much that we hold to be self-evident, but that is sometimes rejected and largely ignored in many classrooms. In the final analysis, it is the Communication of ideas, feelings and relationships that is the touchstone of our work.

When planning a curriculum, one must first establish one's philosophical position in regard to education. Our belief is that students feel the need to use their minds <u>analytically</u>, their feelings and imaginations <u>responsively</u> and to acquire a number of <u>skills</u>. We seek to incorporate a balance between these educational modes of learning in our practical day by day method of teaching, in which each compliments the other and provides a different educational slant on the material explored. Students' needs vary considerably, and there is skill in finding the right balance; but in our experience, when the balance appropriate to a particular group is realised, learning becomes a deeply satisfying experience for students.

When dealing in these modes of learning it becomes apparent that Analysis depends largely on language and the acquisition of Skills calls on a whole range of technical forms of expression, but Response to feeling and imagination may very well be <u>non-verbal</u>. Do we then see this as appropriate to our programme? Our response is a very definite "Yes". Because:

1. We have referred to the relationship between Language and Experience; the areas of imagination and feeling are often at a deep level of experience, and may in addition represent unfamiliar experience. Initially one may well be bereft of language; later, perhaps much later, one "matures" and "finds the words". It is important for teachers to realise that the relationship between verbal and non-verbal behaviour is far more complex than simply the act of speaking or not speaking.

2. The response to the experience may remain non-verbal, but express itself through music, paint, movement or other art form; as non-verbal modes of Communication they remain central to our work, in which we see the interaction of the various communication channels in Self Development and in Interpersonal Relationships. Perhaps a diagram, at this point, would be helpful:



Personal Response or Wider Application to Education.

It is important to examine the extent to which our course reflects the happy "accidental" fusion of personalities. Has our work wider application? W.P.Robinson, writing in 1977 about our programme,(8) states "Nor am I such a romantic that I imagine there are magical solutions to the problems of secondary education. I do not think there are any brilliant solutions waiting to be found. Our problem is to produce intelligent analyses of our present activities and to apply the conclusions of our deliberations." This statement we agree with wholeheartedly. It is precisely true of our work.

1. Personal Response

The fact that we are a cohesive and mutually supportive group can hardly be over-emphasised. At so many different levels our work simply could not have evolved in this way without this setting. Course content is highly personal and is the expression of a particular enthusiasm. In my role of co-ordinator, an important part of my work is to help my staff discover their areas of deepest interest, then structure this into the syllabus. If one of us feels she has exhausted the possibilities, for her, of one aspect of her work, she may either exchange the topic with a colleague, or look for something quite different. Each of my colleagues have become experts in their chosen areas and thereby valuable "Resource Persons" within our group, for the students, and for other members of staff in the school. Let it not be thought that the teacher indulges her interest at the expense of the students. At every level the interests of the students are closely monitored: different techniques are used - discussion, questionnaires, electives, the intuitive teaching that recognises problems and brings them up for departmental discussion, and so forth. It should also be remembered that almost anything can be made of riveting interest, and that enthusiasm is infectious. Our Course Content, then, is highly personal and constantly shifting. There would be no point in other teachers or schools taking our syllabus and attempting to reproduce it. That would be completely to misunderstand the nature of our work.

2. Wider Application

We do not "teach Oracy". It is the framework to all we do. We call it the Oral Approach, and it is applicable across-the-curriculum, and in every school. In our experience, many teachers are so bound up with the surface features of their classes and the subject matter they are teaching, that other important features escape their attention. D.H.Hargreaves (9) discusses the interpersonal relations in a classroom, awareness of which opens up many possibilities for education using the Oral Approach. Douglas Barnes in "From Communication to Curriculum" (10) emphasises his concept of Action Knowledge as opposed to School Knowledge, and seems to us to reach right into the heart of what could be happening in every school. Awareness of the layers of learning, and the varied modes of teaching available to teachers, is largely acquired through reading, experiment, thinking and discussing, experimenting again and forming "habits of variation".

The Teacher of Speech and Drama

There has been a hiatus in the development of teachers specialising in Oral Skills. The Speech Teacher who is mainly concerned with the Voice Beautiful, a Middle Class Accent, and the Speaking of Verse, is not on the same wave length. And it is true that there are Speech Teachers today whose horizons stretch no further. There are Drama Teachers, radical in their de-schooling philosophy, to whom the mention of Oral Skills is either identified as Elocution or dry-as-dust Academia, not to be compared with the Higher Echelons of their Art. There are English Teachers, firmly reared in the discipline of Lit. Crit., whose notions of Oral Skill are centred round the Lecturette and the Class Debate. In the final analysis who you are is more important than the initial training. However, the Speech and Drama training, when it is of sufficient calibre, and when it is extended by wide reading and watchful perceptions, offers a range of useful skills.

1. The Speech and Drama teacher has specialised training in the field of Audience Communication. There are valuable spin-offs from this: the creation of the appropriate atmosphere for the activity; the effective reading aloud of stimulus material; the easy habit of projection (I do not mean "volume") to every student; the immediacy of concentration developed through interpretation work. These and other professional skills are desirable in this field.

2. "Drama" is a superb tool for extending language by varying context, register and function. John Seeley's book "In Context" (11) explores this idea very fully and John Dixon, too, has much of value to say on this matter. "Patterns of Language" by Stratta, Dixon and Wilkinson (12) is another book in which the relationship is clearly revealed.

3. "Speech" is already identified with Oral Communication and the shift in emphasis from "The Art of Speech" to "Speaking" enables the Speech Teacher to move rapidly from the concerns of past years to the exciting and demanding concerns of today. Perhaps Trudgill's "Accent, Dialect and the School" (13) should be required reading!

The Assessment of Oracy in the Classroom

Assessment in the 70's is a controversial subject. Opinions vary widely from, say, the classical mode (what is measurable? Decide on features; decide on measurement instrument; administrate instrument; assess data gathered; reach conclusion) to innovative models, such as the discrimination technique projected by Elliot Eisner. (14) Fringe opinion has queried the validity of any form of assessment, and the right of teachers to make an assessment (impose values). This last view, too, has been discussed by our group, but rejected on the grounds that teachers have a professional responsibility to their students to assess their efforts. In addition, in any caring relationship there will be an interest in, and concern for, the developing abilities of the student. We are interested not only in the value that teacher assessments might have for the student, but also in the value that accrues to the teacher - not only is one's sensitive perception of one's students sharpened, but one's own work is shaped and modified.
We are less interested in the measurements as such; more interested in their function within the educational process. It is important that the mechanics of formulating and then expressing the assessment must not be at odds with the learning process. We are spending time considering this point carefully, in the hope that we may eventually arrive at the point where we may evaluate the appropriateness of differing modes and expressions of assessment.

The expression of the assessment is of real significance. The immediate spontaneous response makes the strongest impact on the student, which may or may not be appropriate. The degree of sincerity, too, is vital, but must be constructively expressed. As a rule of thumb, we would give (and would expect from the Peer group) an immediate response of acceptance, coupled with either interest or enthusiasm, or at the least, politeness. Later, when the immediacy of the moment is past, we give an analysis to facilitate improvement.

The formulation of the assessment flings us immediately into the area of really difficult problems.

1. The Problem of Complexity

Sheer complexity is the main problem we confront. Probably the first step in the less experienced teacher's attempts to assess the complexities of oral behaviour is to Simplify; to look for one element at a time until a "repertoire of recognitions" is built up. We have developed material we believe to be helpful in this regard. To ask a teacher to divide perceptions into a greater number of classes than he has power to discriminate is to introduce a spurious and illusory appearance of close assessment. Better to grade simply until the need for more subtle distinctions is perceived.

2. The Problem of Transience

The actual components of Oral skill are transient. There is seldom time for a teacher to concentrate on a carefully reasoned analysis of the process, followed immediately by a careful exposé of the results of one's deliberations while a class is in progress. One either responds simultaneously of deliberates and teases out the complexities later, with the aid of records.

Simultaneous Assessment

This happens constantly at the "intuitive" level, and is the way in which the teacher of Oral Activities monitors the development of each lesson. Hence it is of considerable importance to develop "good instincts". However the whole area of language - voice, speech, dialect, accent, etc. is one larded with unreasoning prejudice and ignorance. Folk myths abound, though many people are all too firmly convinced of the correctness of their own opinions. Section 10.9 of the Bullock Report (15) is relevant in this context:

> 'In spoken language the paralinguistic features we have been describing strongly influence one person's judgement of another's effectiveness. This fact is tacitly recognised by most people who know they can be charmed by nonsense or bored by sense. What they are largely unaware of is exactly how this is happening. Some teachers acquire a high degree of skill in assessing the spoken language of their pupils, but there is evidence that very many find it difficult. We believe that an explicit understanding of the nature of spoken language would extend their ability to influence it. the teacher's own speech is a crucial factor in developing that of his pupils; even more important are the understanding and the informed attitudes he brings to the whole undertaking.'

It follows that the teacher must never rely too complacently on the "correctness" of responses. The Moderation panel is a valuable aid to teacher development, as well as a factor in reducing the risk of error.

The Focal Point

Since careful deliberation of an assessment at the fully conscious level while simultaneously teaching is so difficult as to be virtually impossible, we come to the use of the "focal point" method of assessment, where the teacher (or moderating panel) so arrange the activity, that it is possible to withdraw from active participation and observe: either making a full record for subsequent analysis, or forming conclusions while the work is still in progress. It should be noted that this "focal point" may be an assignment, when students are conscious of being assessed; it may equally well be an activity during which students are unconscious of the teacher's deliberations.

3. The Problem of Subjectivity

The ramifications of this problem are further complicated by the nature of the activity, and spring from the core of one's underlying philosophy. Further problems are raised: Can Oracy be divorced from subjective context? If it is - is it still Oracy? How much should we strive for objectivity? How valid is the frankly subjective assessment? What of the Halo Effect? And so forth . . .

Certainly purely objective measurements can be made.

For example: the range and pattern of pitch levels;
the duration of pauses;
the vocabulary used;
the structure of the utterances, and so forth.

However, many people would maintain that, for instance, much of an utterance can only be measured by its effect on listeners; the listener in turn bringing to the encounter his own experience, motivation, personality, mental set, etc. In other words we tend to make our meanings relative to other people's communication with us. But, so long as teachers rely on subjective methods of assessment we are back with the problem of folk belief and illogicality. Assessors often do not perceive the same things, and they evaluate what they do perceive in different ways. When students are aware of being assessed, they too bring a range of further responses to the encounter, which may validate the assessment only in that particular context ...

We take heart that we are not alone with our problems! We are at present developing a range of assessment modes and instruments which we hope will eventually be of service to practising teachers in the classroom. We are most interested, too, in using several assessors whenever possible. Peer group assessment is interesting, but has serious pitfalls. However the assessment is arrived at, there is one factor that our team feels most strongly. Assessment must not be allowed to run counter to the Teaching/Learning situation, which should develop a relationship atmosphere of trust, acceptance and mutual respect. In any situation where growth and measurement are incompatible, it is the measurement that must be dispensed with.

In conclusion, we would like to acknowledge a debt. Peter Robinson has been quoted several times in this paper. His response to our work, and his perception of what we are trying to achieve, have encouraged us to probe more deeply, with more confidence. It will be appropriate to finish with a further quotation:(16)

> "Happy the day when most of us are able to express our thoughts simply, clearly, precisely and elegantly with due consideration for our listeners' knowledge and needs."

References and Footnotes

1. F. Inglis: "Radical Innocence: Fiction and Experience" - English in Australia No.47 March 1979, Page 16
2. Doughty, Pearce & Thornton: "Language in Use" -Edward Arnold, 1971
3. Bullock A. Lord (chairman): "A Language for Life" - HMSO, 1975
4. W.P.Robinson: "Language & Social Behaviour" - Penguin Books Ltd., 1972, pp.50/51
5. M.Joos: "The Five Clocks" - Harcourt Brace
6. Doughty, A. & P.: "Language and Community" - Edward Arnold, 1974, p.26
7. W.P.Robinson: "Language In and Out of Schools: Academic Heresies and Blinkers" English in Australia, No. 34, February, 1976
8. W.P.Robinson: "A Freedom to Speak" - English in Australia, No. 40, May 1977, p.30
9. D.H.Hargreaves: "Interpersonal Relations and Education" Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975
10. D. Barnes: "From Communication to Curriculum" - Penguin Books Ltd., 1976
11. J. Seeley: "In Context: Language and Drama in the Secondary School" - Oxford University Press, 1976
12. Stratta, Dixon & Wilkinson: "Patterns of Language" - Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1973
13. P. Trudgill: "Accent, Dialect and the School" - Edward Arnold, 1975
14. E.W.Eisner: "Instructional and Expressive Educational Objectives: their formulation and use in curriculum" - Pub. in W. James Popham "Instructional Objectives" A.E.R.A. Monograph Series on Curriculum Evaluation, No. 3, Chicago Rand McNally, 1969, pp. 1-18:

    "An expressive objective does not specify the behaviour the student is to acquire after having engaged in one or more learning activities ... Consequently the evaluative task is not one of applying a common standard to the product produced, but one of reflecting upon what has been produced in order to reveal its uniqueness and significance ..."

15. Bullock A. Lord (chairman): "A Language for Life" op cit
16. W.P.Robinson: "Language In and Out of School: Academic Heresies and Blinkers" op cit

* * * * * * *